

The Wedding Ring

Silver, Iron, Gold

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"BLESS, O Lord, this ring," says the priest as he makes the sign of the cross over the golden wedding ring on the salver before him,—“this ring which we bless in Thy name, that she who wears it, keeping true faith unto her husband, may abide in Thy peace and Thy will, and ever live in mutual love. Through Christ Our Lord. Amen.”

Sprinkling the ring with blessed water, in the form of a cross, the priest now gives it to the bridegroom, who gently places it on the outstretched finger of the bride, the while he says:

“With this ring I thee wed, and I pledge unto thee my troth.”

Such is the scene that takes place before the altar of God, where man and maid mutually pledge themselves to each other, to be husband and wife thereafter: “to have and to hold, from this day forth; for better for worse; for richer, or poorer; in sickness, in health, until death do us part.”

Precious, because of all that it implies, is that wedding ring placed on the finger of the bride.

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Marriage, though Divinely planned from the beginning, has not always existed under the same conditions. Scanning the pages of impartial and authentic history, we find that woman's place in society has varied according to the religious conditions under which she has lived. Three marriage rings, one of silver, one of iron, and one of gold, can fittingly be taken to symbolize respectively her position under pre-Christian revealed religion, under paganism, and finally under the protecting mantle of the Church.

First of all, a work Divine, came the *silver* nuptial ring. It was fashioned in beauty and purity by the hand of God from a star, as it were, of heaven's blue. Sparkling in it were two precious jewels of purest ray, *unity* and *perpetuity*. It represented an inviolable and inseparable bond, existing between one man and one woman, only, “two in one flesh,” until death should them part.

"This now is bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh," exclaimed Adam, "she shall be called woman because she was taken out of man. Wherefore a man shall leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall be two in one flesh."

Wrought in the fire of God's love, the jeweled silver ring was fashioned by the power of Divine omnipotence, after the design of His infinite wisdom. But man sinned and was cast forth from Paradise. His intellect was darkened and his will weakened by transgression added to transgression. Centuries rolled by, and little by little the splendor of that silver ring was tarnished, the jewels were ruthlessly torn from their setting and cast away.

Polygamy arose and the gem of *unity* was wrenched from God's circlet. On woman fell the shame and degradation, but man was of necessity dragged down with her.

Divorce, too, appeared upon the earth. With reckless hand it plucked from out the silver ring its second gem, the clear and priceless jewel of *perpetuity*. Woman's was the loss again, hers the bitterness, the hardship and the pain, but man once more shared with her in the deplorable consequences.

Not because God willed it should be so, did Moses grant the bill of divorce. When the Jews objected to Christ's doctrine which forbade the evil of divorce, and quoted in their favor the Mosaic permission, Our Lord gave the explanation why such a concession had ever been made to them: "Because Moses by reason of the hardness of your heart permitted you to put away your wives; but from the beginning it was not so."

Yet woman's lot among the Jews, even at the greatest religious decline of that nation, had still remained enviable when compared with the fate of her hapless sisters, bowed down to earth under the cruel bondage of paganism. Not only had God's silver ring been tarnished and its jewels lost, but the very preciousness of its pure metal had been debased with the change of religion into idolatry. A ring of *iron* was the ring of wedlock now; a fetter of slavery, the fitting symbol of man's relentless inhumanity to woman.

Christ came. He took into His hand the tarnished silver ring, and sadly lifted up the iron circlet that the Gentile

woman wore. How pitiably dark and lusterless! In His compassion and great tenderness He would not rest content with merely restoring them to all their former beauty. His love was infinite and His power was no less. His purpose was Divine. He would transmute them into purest gold, and in that splendid setting, such as the world had never seen before, He would replace the jewels plucked away and lost. Woman's had been the greatest shame and sorrow, hers was now to be the special joy and honor.

This primal ordination of Almighty God, made in an Eden of unalloyed delight, our Divine Lord reconfirmed. "Therefore now they are not two, but one flesh; what therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder."

Inviolable unity and perpetuity unto death were to be under the New Testament, as "from the beginning," the two principal properties of Christian marriage. Never were they to be set aside in the Church of God. Henceforth they would be most potent factors in assuring to the wife her sacred rights and lifting her up to her true position of dignity by the side of man. The lost jewels had been found again, and Christ restored them to their rightful place. Woman's was directly the gain, but all humanity was lifted up with her.

Jew and Gentile were alike to be received into His Church, and there was to be in it but one bond for man and woman united in His name. It was to be a ring of *gold*, a sacred, sacramental bond, inseparable as "from the beginning" existing between one man and one woman. If to the husband belonged the headship of the home, to the wife henceforth belonged the equal right to be cherished and loved by him unto death.

Henceforth to the end of time that ring of gold was to remain forever the priceless image of the mystic and inseparable union between Christ and His one and only Church. It was to be the symbol of that unspeakable bond ever existing between the Divine Bridegroom and the Spouse begotten on Calvary from His opened side.

Such is the golden marriage ring, rich with the luster of its jeweled beauty, which Christ has left to woman in His infallible Church: "This is a great sacrament; but I speak in Christ and in the Church."

The Silver Wedding Ring

The Jewish Marriage

IN the Sacred Scriptures we are given the sole authentic history of primal man and woman. But in particular we can gather from its pages the complete story of Jewish woman in holy wedlock.

Marriage, as we know, was then regarded as the vocation to be ambitioned by every Jewish maiden. For this reason Our Lady's vow of perpetual virginity is doubly remarkable. Of the fact of this vow there can of course be no doubt. It is clearly implied in Mary's answer to the Angel at the Annunciation: "How shall this be done, because I know not man." Although the true wife of Joseph, who himself must consequently have been similarly pledged, Mary had consecrated herself to a life of virginal chastity. Thus by His inspiration God had prepared her for the sublime function of Divine Motherhood.

Mary alone of all women was to be a trinity in one; wedded wife, true mother, and ever-inviolable virgin.

The position of Jewish woman in wedlock was far superior to that of her sisters in the surrounding nations, so long at least as the Mosaic regulations were faithfully observed. Not iron, as under paganism, the wedding ring she wore, nor yet of gold, as under the future Christianity, but silver, dimmed in brightness through the many past transgressions of both man and woman alike.

Most sadly of all, it had lost its jewelled preciousness. Through human fault and carelessness the gems of unity and perpetuity had fallen out of their firm setting and were not again restored. Not until the coming of Christ would woman receive her sacramental ring of gold, with its clear diamond of inviolable unity and its fair, crimsoned ruby of perpetuity unto death.

Woman's position, we must understand, was no longer what, by the Divine will, it had been in the beginning. Her place in Oriental society was already bitterly degraded when Abram went forth from Ur of the Chaldees, that from him the Jewish race might spring, and through them the promised Saviour be born. He alone, with Divine strength, could lift up fallen man and woman.

The legislation of the Old Law, whether regarding marriage or other practices, must not be taken as expressing

the ideal that God would have desired, but rather as accommodated to a people who, as Christ and the prophets said, were hard of heart and had sunk into many evils. Practices, therefore, which had become the accepted custom in the world of that day, although not laudable, were often still permitted, but limited and regulated so as to be made conformable to essential requirements and do as little harm as possible. Woman herself was thus preserved from greater evils that would else have befallen her, and was saved from the degradation to which she was subjected under paganism. In the meantime the heights of pre-Christian virtue were still kept open for all who wished to climb them.

A peculiarly instructive picture of woman's condition during the early patriarchal period is given in the life of Rachel. Few women ever won from man such love and such devotion as Jacob bestowed upon her. Her memory as a model wife remained enshrined in the hearts of her people. "The Lord make this woman who cometh into thy house, like Rachel and Lia, who built up the house of Israel," was the exclamation of the bystanders at the marriage of Booz and Ruth. Even to the present day the Church retains her name with that of Sara and Rebecca in the Nuptial Mass.

The first fact impressed upon us in this connection is the righteous horror of the Jews for the marriage of their sons with the women of the heathen nations. "I am weary of my life because of the daughters of Heth," said Rebecca to Isaac. "If Jacob take a wife of the stock of the land, I choose not to live."

"This was a noble word. Like a true mother and a true wife Rebecca fulfilled her high function, gently but firmly pointing out to husband and son the evil they were bound to avoid. Woman had therefore realized her supreme power and obligation of inspiring man with noble ideals and of keeping his feet steadfast upon the path of duty.

"Juda hath profaned the holiness of the Lord," was the sad wail of the prophet in later centuries, "and hath married the daughter of a strange god." Had woman neglected her task and failed in her duty of guidance?

We vividly behold here the baneful results of mixed marriage, whether in Jewish days or in our own Christian

Dispensation. They are, as the general rule, most destructive to Catholic Faith. Its loss in entire families can be clearly traced to this evil. They are insidiously dangerous of their very nature, and most insistently and earnestly the Church warns her children against entering into such unions.

As a shepherdless Rachel was tending her father's flock when Jacob met her. The unnatural restraint placed upon woman in modern Oriental life, because of a false religion which has robbed her of her finer sense of womanly delicacy, was then unknown. Her purity was sacred to man. "Rachel was well favored, and of a beautiful countenance. And Jacob being in love with her said (to Laban her father): I will serve thee seven years for Rachel thy younger daughter." For twice seven years he was to toil before he won his bride.

Taking into account the difference of time and custom, we might almost see by anticipation a trait of Christian chivalry in the devotion of Jacob for Rachel. It is no less pure than ardent; no less constant than heroic. In the midst of a heathen civilization the chosen people of God were already giving proof of the power of religion to purify man's regard for woman.

But many likewise were the dark shadows in that picture which were not to be dispelled until the coming of the new worship in spirit and in truth, when woman should be raised to the summit of her dignity. The idols which Rachel stole from her father's house and hid beneath her camel's furniture when he came to search for them, were a symbol of the Babylonian abominations which still degraded woman. Such superstitions continued for a time within the heart of Rachel side by side with the pure monotheistic religion.

Not only was there polygamy, but other customs likewise survived at this period which are repugnant to our Christian instincts. The consequences were preferences on the part of the husband, disagreements and jealousies on the part of the wives and quarrels among the children of the different mothers.

That such practices were tolerated by the Jewish law itself is not surprising, referring to the bill of divorce. Our Lord said: "Moses by reason of the hardness of

your heart permitted you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so."

Divorce, however, could not be invoked by the husband, except for grave offences on the part of his wife. The moral laxity and legalized polygamy we everywhere behold about us in our own "advanced" civilization was not tolerated by the Jewish code, though abuses crept in against which the prophet Malachias inveighs in terrible words. The weeping and tears of the cast-off women before the altar of the Lord, he tells his people, caused God to reject the sacrifices offered Him and to refuse all atonement: "Because the Lord hath been witness between thee, and the wife of thy youth, whom thou hast despised: yet she was thy partner, and the wife of thy covenant." Thus true religion ever protected woman.

Woman's dignity suffered sadly, yet her place among the Jews was immeasurably superior to the position occupied by her in the surrounding paganism. It was higher and worthier than in the rehabilitated paganism of our own day. There was no false liberty allowed to man or woman outside the bounds of the law. If any one seduced a virgin he was to dower her and take her to wife, nor could he ever be divorced from her all his life.

Divorce was strictly limited. The most reverential obedience was to be given to the mother as well as to the father in the Jewish household. There was even a foreshadowing of the sublime Christian conception of marriage in that union of God with His chosen people described as the union of husband with wife. Israel and Juda are the "two women, daughters of one mother," whom the Prophet Ezechiel calls "Oolla the elder and Ooliba her younger sister." The same figure is used by the Prophet Jeremias. Conforming His words to the accepted custom of His people, God thus gives sacredness to the marriage bond, and impresses upon husband and wife the duties of love and fidelity.

The pure monogamistic ideal was proposed in the book of Genesis. There is mention of only one wife in the Book of Job, who says of himself: "I made a covenant with my eyes that I would not so much as think upon a virgin." The love of man for woman found its Divine expression in the Cantic of Canticles, symbolizing the pure love of

Christ for His Church. Finally, an inspiring picture of true wifely dignity, virtue and usefulness is given in the Book of Proverbs. The famous passage beautifully illustrates the loftiness of the ideal the Jewish woman might attain in her state of wifehood. It is known as "The Golden Alphabet" because in the original song the initial letters of the twenty-two verses present in regular order the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

Who shall find a valiant woman? far and from the uttermost coasts is the price of her.

The heart of her husband trusteth in her and he shall have no need of spoils.

She will render him good, and not evil, all the days of her life.

She hath sought wool and flax, and hath wrought by the counsel of her hands.

She is like the merchant's ship, she bringeth her bread from afar.

And she hath risen in the night, and given a prey to her household, and victuals to her maidens.

She hath considered a field, and bought it: with the fruit of her hands she hath planted a vineyard.

She had girded her loins with strength, and hath strengthened her arm.

She hath tasted and seen that her traffic is good: her lamp shall not be put out in the night.

She hath put out her hand to strong things, and her fingers have taken hold of the spindle.

She hath opened her hand to the needy, and hath stretched out her hands to the poor.

She shall not fear for her house in the cold of snow: for all her domestics are clothed with double garments.

She hath made for herself a clothing of tapestry: fine linen and purple is her covering.

Her husband is honorable in the gates, when he sitteth among the senators of the land.

She hath made fine linen, and sold it, and delivered a girdle to the Chanaanite.

Strength and beauty are her clothing, and she shall laugh in the latter day.

She hath opened her mouth to wisdom, and the law of clemency is on her tongue.

She hath looked well to the paths of her house, and hath not eaten her bread idle.

Her children rose up and called her blessed: her husband, and he praised her.

Many daughters have gathered together riches: thou hast surpassed them all.

Favor is deceitful, and beauty is vain: the woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised.

Give her of the fruit of her hands: and let her works praise her in the gates (Prov. xxxi. 10-31).

Thus in this queenly woman, the wife of a leader in the land, we find realized all the highest aspirations of the Jewish woman's heart in the holy state of matrimony. Religion itself had not failed. Though only a preparation for Christianity, it had produced in a single small land, and among a people hard at heart, more great and wonderful women than all the rest of the vast pre-Christian civilization could boast.

That the high ideal of matrimony, which in the beginning God gave to the human race, was no longer followed by mankind, nor observed in its perfection even by the Jewish people, was due entirely to the perversity of the human will. Religion did what then lay in its power to purify and ennoble hearts until the fulness of time should arrive and bring the Saviour. What we owe to Him, in this our day, we can never adequately realize. "Of His fulness we all have received, and grace for grace. For the law was given by Moses, grace and truth came by Jesus Christ."

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The Iron Wedding Ring

The Pagan Marriage

SAD is the tale of woman's degradation under paganism, the reign of selfishness and lust. "Come therefore," was the cry, "and let us enjoy the good things that are present, and let us speedily use the creatures as in youth."

No longer regarded as the cherished helpmate of man, made like him to the image of God, and called equally with him to work out an eternal destiny, she had now become merely the flower of the time. Being the feebler creature, she was "found to be nothing worth," except as she could minister to man's gratification. Idolatry and slavery, lust and cruelty, had worked together to corrupt the pagan home. Not gold, nor silver, but of iron, roughly wrought, was the pagan woman's wedding ring.

The most enviable position allotted to the wife in pre-Christian civilization, outside the chosen nation of God, was apparently occupied by her in early Egyptian society. *Nebtper*, "ruler of the house," is the honorable title given her in various inscriptions. In the most ancient documents the husband is advised to treat her with gentleness and teach the children to respect her. Even monogamy seems to have existed then.

But with the further decline of religion woman was degraded among the Egyptians as among all other pagan nations of the pre-Christian period. Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, and other Oriental countries bear witness to her degeneration and distress. The lascivious cult of Babel-Assur, spreading like a black death through the ancient world, destroyed still more completely the virtue and the dignity of woman.

As a safe historic principle we may lay down the following general rule, applicable to all the great pagan nations of antiquity: The nearer they stood to the well-springs of primal Revelation, and the more purely they preserved their earliest traditions, the loftier was woman's position, and the more justly was she recognized to be the companion and helpmate, and not the slave of man. The farther they receded from the fountain of Divine Revela-

tion, and the more deeply they sank into idolatry and its impurities, the darker became the fate of woman and the more completely was she regarded as the chattel of her pagan husband, destined only to serve his ambition, his utility and his pleasure. Her "emancipation" under paganism, where this occurred, implied merely a still greater licentiousness and degradation.

"Lying, rashness, falsehood, folly, greed, impurity and cruelty are the inborn faults of women," said the old Hindu proverb. Wives were, therefore, to be kept "day and night" in that seclusion to which the Oriental world condemned them. Greatly sinned against and greatly sinning, woman was both dishonored and distrusted. A Sennacherib or Zenobia are only meteoric apparitions. The same may be said of the Lesbian school of woman poets.

With the Divine plan in the relations of the sexes to each other thus disregarded, it is not surprising that at times we should meet extravagances of an entirely opposite kind. An interesting illustration occurs in the Libbey papyrus containing an Egyptian marriage contract of the time of Alexander the Great. In the following terse terms the bride impresses upon her future husband the obligation of paying a suitable price for her affection, generously promises to allow him one-third of their common earnings and reserves to herself the liberty of dismissing him at pleasure:

You give me five tenths of silver. I repeat: five-tenths of silver for my wifely gift. If I send you, the man, away, inasmuch as I hate you and love another man more than you, I will give you two and a half tenths of silver. I repeat: two and a half tenths of silver. I will let you have one-third of all that I shall earn together with you as long as you are married to me.

In their treatment of "mere man" our modern militants have much to learn from this Egyptian sister of more than 2,000 years ago. The so-called "progressive" doctrines, too, concerning love and marriage should be termed *retrogressive*, verging, as they do, toward this ancient paganism. The Egyptian Cupid to whom the ancient document introduces us is blind to nothing except the laws of God; and might well be painted with a money-bag in place of the less mischievous bow. He has many worshippers today.

As in Egypt, so in Greece and Rome, the position of woman was most conformable to her natural dignity in the earliest civilization when religion was still least debased and the truth of the one only God was more clearly reflected in the mighty supremacy of Zeus or Jove. The most idyllic scenes of Greek home life are found in the Homeric poems. But even at this period we cannot fail to see the irreverence toward woman everywhere inherent in paganism.

The quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon takes place because of a woman, but the only apparent indications of love are such as the Christian imagination unconsciously supplies in reading the Homeric verses. Briseis is valued as a prize of war, and because of her skill in performing domestic service for her master.

Not more love is wasted upon Helen, whom Paris had abducted and because of whom the Trojan war itself was waged. After torrents of blood have been shed and hecatombs of men offered up, the Spartan king receives her back without any signs of tenderness or emotion, but, as a French writer has cleverly said, "with the gratification of a gentleman whose watch or umbrella have been stolen and who is satisfied to have them at last returned to him."

There is no real respect for womanhood on the part of the old Homeric heroes whose occupation by predilection was piracy and sacking of cities. A great fidelity of a kind is shown by Ulysses towards his wife. Yet what could be sadder than to behold her isolated within the women's apartment of her home and placed under the complete domination of her stripling son Telemachus. Such was the fate of the Greek as well, as of the Hindu wife.

"Woman," reads the law of Manu, "depends upon her father in childhood, upon husband in youth, upon her son after her husband's death, or if there are no sons, upon her husband's near relatives, for woman should never govern herself."

There was only one class of women to whom in the golden age of Athens real freedom and some honor were granted, and these were the *hetaerae*, the fallen women, whose sacrifice of purity was not accounted as the least vice or impropriety, and who might accompany the men to all the public assemblies from which the wives and daugh-

ters of these same Athenians were rigidly excluded.

Is not the modern paganism accepting similar standards of immorality, not merely in the "free love" doctrines of social and intellectual radicalism, or in the lives of our wealthy debauchees, but in the practices sanctioned or connivingly tolerated in "polite society"? In regard to the position, on the other hand, of the true Greek wife herself, in the society of that day, Mozans says: "So great was the seclusion in which the wives of the Greeks then lived that they never attended public spectacles and never left the house, unless accompanied by a female slave. They were not permitted to see men except in the presence of their husbands, nor could they have a seat even at their own tables, if their husbands happened to have male guests." On this code of morality the greatest moralists and teachers of Greece set the seal of their approval. To a fallen woman Socrates pays his glowing tribute in Plato's symposium and such a woman Plato himself gladly admitted among the number of his most intimate pupils.

Only the outward depravity of Greek life has been briefly touched upon here. Woman's degradation increased as religion became still more debased. Equally vile in many respects were conditions in Rome, though the Roman matron was not denied her freedom like the Greek wife. She often enjoyed a great degree of influence and might even preside at public games and religious ceremonies. "We Romans rule over all men and our wives rule over us," was the surly remark of Cato the Censor.

But in spite of these facts the lot of the Roman wife was far from enviable. The most shameful impurity had lost its horror in Rome as in Greece. Slavery under paganism had made of the home itself a cesspool of vice. The greatest consolation offered to Cicero at the early death of his beloved daughter was the reflection that her untimely fate should be considered as rather a blessing for her, since happiness as a wife would have been practically impossible amid the hideous immorality of that idolatrous Rome, as even the pagan philosopher saw it.

Outright tyranny on the husband's part might further be dreaded, and time was when, under given circumstances, he could even sell his wife or put her to death. Yet when woman finally achieved her "emancipation" un-

der Roman paganism, it was an emancipation from even the little morality that still was hers. There followed a very riot of licentiousness which only brought about deeper misery. Marriage lost its religious significance and many regarded it as altogether unnecessary. Others, according to Seneca, numbered their years not by the Consuls but by the successive husbands they had married. Paganism, then as now, was ever the same, although in our day Christian traditions still prevent its ultimate consequence.

It is needless to dwell longer upon this subject. A Cornelia, who saw her most precious jewels in her sons, was a marvel to paganism. Yet, when we reflect, we realize that in this she represents no more than what we may rightly expect from every Christian wife and mother.

Under the conditions I have here described there was no prospect that woman could reinstate herself. Neither could man, who had humiliated her, lift her up again. Together they had fallen into that depth of degradation which St. Paul beheld in his day and described in such terrible words. His picture accords with what the pagan Sallust saw and faithfully recorded. Yet all hope had not vanished. A Divine Redeemer could still mercifully take into His hands that iron wedding ring and transform it into gold.

The Golden Wedding Ring

The Christian Marriage

"THIS is a great sacrament," says St. Paul in reference to the true Christian marriage, "but I speak in Christ and in the church."

At these words three scenes rise before our minds.

The first brings us back to the very dawn of human history. The place is Paradise, and there, from the side of the sleeping Adam, Eve is formed. "It is not good for man to be alone, let us make him a helpmate like unto himself," the Triune God decreed in His infinite wisdom.

And God brought her to Adam.

"This now is bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh," Adam said, "she shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man. Wherefore a man shall leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they shall be *two in one flesh*."

Thousands of years passed. Against a darkened sky, on the mound of Calvary, three crosses rose. Midmost on that height, with Roman legionaries gazing up at Him, the Second Adam hung, sunk in the sleep of death.

"But one of the soldiers with a spear opened his side, and immediately there came out blood and water."

From the side of the first Adam Eve was formed, from the side of the Second Adam the Church was begotten. Such is the interpretation the Fathers give of this tremendous scene. As the first Eve was to be "one flesh" with Adam, so the Church, Christ's mystic Spouse, holy and without blemish, was to be united with Him in the closest and most sacred of unions. It is that union of Christ with His Church which now for all time is proposed to us as the model of the hallowed relation between man and woman in the bond of Christian marriage. Such is the meaning of the words of St. Paul: "This is a great sacrament . . . but in Christ and in the church."

As the first scene I have described was a type of the second, so the third we are now to witness is likewise a symbol of that union of Christ with His Church. Yet it is far more, too, than a mere symbol. What there takes place is in all truth an efficacious sign of the life of grace. It is a Sacrament and a great Sacrament.

The background is the lighted altar. Before it stands the white-vested priest, prepared to offer up in an unbloody manner the same tremendous Sacrifice that took place on Calvary. In the foreground, at the altar steps, are the Christian bridegroom and his bride.

Not a mere civil convention, not a purely legal contract, not a tie to be lightly formed and as lightly broken, but a lasting and inviolable bond is the union effected there. It is a solemn pact witnessed not merely by man, but by God and His Holy Angels, and recorded for all eternity in the registry of heaven, with sacred obligations to posterity and to the Church.

From the opening of His public ministry Our Divine Lord manifested his deep concern for the sanctity of the marriage bond. "The beginning of miracles" took place at a nuptial feast in Cana of Galilee. Here, too, the Mother of Christ appeared in her great role as intercessor with her Son. "Even from that day forth," wrote Pope Leo XIII, "it seemed as if the beginning of a new holiness had been conferred on human marriage."

But the greatest gift Christ bestowed on woman in married life was to raise marriage itself to the dignity of a Sacrament of the New Law. That He has done so in reality we know beyond doubt. Such is the tradition of the Universal Church, such is the doctrine of the Councils and the evidence of the earliest liturgies of the East and West which even call it in express terms a "Sacrament of the living." Such is the testimony of St. Augustine when he ranks Christian marriage with the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Orders. (*De Bono Coniugii*). Such is the teaching clearly "intimated" in the Epistle of St. Paul to the Ephesians.

The words of the great Apostle, referring to Christian marriage as a "sacrament," might well perhaps be taken in a broader meaning were it not for the sense of the entire context. Christian marriage, as he describes it, is a sacred and mysterious symbol of the union of Christ with His Church; it is a faithful representation of the relations existing between the Divine Bridegroom and His Mystic Bride, mirrored in the relations between husband and wife. The marriage of Adam and Eve in Paradise was likewise, as we have seen, a symbol of this

union; but Christian marriage was to be something even greater. The rites of the Old Testament were, in the words of the Apostle to the Galatians, "weak and needy elements"; but this is clearly distinct from them, more than they: "This is a *great* sacrament." Unlike them it is therefore not an empty sign, but an efficacious sign of the life of grace, or, in other words, a true sacrament. Well might Tertullian exclaim in the second century of the Christian era: "How can we describe the happiness of those marriages which the Church ratifies, the Sacrifice strengthens, the blessing seals, the Angels publish and the Heavenly Father propitiously beholds!" (*Ad Uxorem.*)

The sacramental effect of Christian marriage consists not merely in symbolizing, but in actually causing a realization of the union between Christ and His Church to exist in the union contracted between Christian husband and wife. This is what we mean by saying that Christian marriage efficaciously represents the union between Christ and His Church. Every Christian marriage is to be, as it were, an impression and reproduction, a copy of that Divine union, and for this effect the sacramental grace is given: "This is a great sacrament, but in Christ and the church." Christian marriage, it is true, may fall short of its sublime sacramental purpose; but the fault is then with man and not with the Sacrament.

The duties to be complied with by husband and wife, if they would rightly correspond with the graces that God gives them to realize this sublime resemblance of the union between Christ and His Church, are clearly explained by St. Paul. In words replete with tenderness and surpassing in beauty all that poets have sung of the sacred flame of human love, the great Apostle thus describes the obligations of the Christian husband:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ also loved the Church, and delivered himself up for it; that he might sanctify it, cleansing it by the layer of water in the word of life; that he might present to himself a glorious church not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy, and without blemish. So also ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife, loveth himself. For no man ever hated his own flesh; but nourisheth it and cherisheth it, as also Christ doth the Church: because we are

members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones.

Could there be a closer intimacy, a greater tenderness, a more delicate affection, a sweeter solicitude than that which is here prescribed as the husband's duty towards his wife? Christ loved the Church even to delivering Himself up for her to the death of the Cross; such is the ideal of that love the Christian husband is taught to cherish towards his wife. Her virtue is to be sacred to him as the sanctity of the Church is dear to Christ. He is to aid her to preserve the splendor of her soul in its spiritual beauty that it may flourish in a perennial youth, which the years can never steal away, though her outward charms should wither like the flowers they resemble. To attain to this perfection of devotion, rendered to the creature for the sake of the Creator, the grace of the Sacrament will never fail him. Verily this is a great Sacrament, in Christ and in the Church.

But woman, too, has her duties to perform. As the Church is subject to Christ, so is she to her husband in true love and fidelity. He is "the head of the wife" by the law of creation and by the express will of God, but in such wise "as Christ is the head of the Church." Her subjection is not ultimately to man, but "to the Lord," whom she beholds in her husband as every Christian sees Him in all rightful authority, rendering cheerful obedience for the love of God. Such subjection is the highest glory of the Christian man and woman. Its supreme examples are Christ Himself and His Virgin Mother. Clear and explicit, again, are the words of St. Paul:

Let women be subject to their husbands, *as to the Lord*: because the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the church. He is the saviour of his body. Therefore as the church is subject to Christ, so also let wives be to their husbands in all things.

A great difference is indicated here between the headship of Christ and of the husband. Christ is the "saviour of his body," the Saviour of the Church. Such the husband can never be in regard to the wife. Her soul equally with his is the direct creation of God. His authority extends to the things pertaining to domestic government, and these must be reasonably interpreted. Only for the pagan

wife can subjection become an indignity, in so far as she obeys man alone and not God. Hence the agitation and the clamor of modern paganism for "emancipation" from domestic government. Not such is the subjection of love on the part of the Christian woman, repaid by the devotion of love bestowed on her by her Christian spouse.

Enlightened and strengthened by the Spirit of God, woman must make it her task to preserve and perfect in her husband the image of Christ. She will understand his weakness only that she may save him from a fall. She will perceive the nobility of his soul that she may daily point out to him the opportunities for Christian service and evermore inspire him to mount to the exalted heights of Christian manhood, while she seeks to realize in herself the perfection of Christian womanhood. She will pray with him and watch with him that together they may attain to the ideal made possible for them both by the grace of this great Sacrament. So will the image of Christ stand forth revealed in the souls of both. They will not live now, but Christ in them, that of two there shall be only one flesh, one soul, one Christ, who is above all and in all. The Lord alone will they serve and love. Such is the meaning of the golden wedding ring the Christian bridegroom places upon the finger of the Christian bride.

But there are still other joys and other responsibilities that it implies. The first object of matrimony is the begetting and rearing of children with whom God shall bless the marriage. Like every state, wedded life must also be a sacrifice, and true happiness is conditioned upon the fidelity and love with which that sacrifice is rendered. For Catholic parents there can be no greater happiness than the thought of children in whom God's name shall be praised for all eternity. There can be for them no diviner pleasure than day by day, with ceaseless watchfulness and prayer, to train them in the way of the Commandments and of Love.

But doubly blessed the parents if Christ shall stoop to choose among their sons and daughters His priests and virginal spouses who shall live in His courts forever and give their lives to love Him and to win souls for Him!

"O, my God," prayed Zélie Guérin, after ill health had

prevented her from entering the cloister, "since I am unworthy to be Thy spouse, I shall enter the married state to fulfil Thy Holy Will, and I beseech Thee to make me the mother of many children, and to grant that all of them may be dedicated to Thee."

The *ninth* child born to her in that sacred wedlock was the Little Flower. All the others were also called to the Religious life, or else, as little angels, straightway winged their flight to Heaven. Zélie's husband, Louis Martin, had in the same manner sought in vain to enter a Religious Order. Together they now gave to God a crown of nine immortal souls. Faithfully they performed their duty in begetting and rearing the offspring His love entrusted to their care, while with the same joyful fidelity the elder children aided in the training of the younger to the knowledge and the love of God.

The Church needs priests, the Church needs Religious vocations, but the Church has also her blessings in store for the zealous men and women whom God providentially guides, in the holy state of matrimony, to bring up for Him the God-fearing, God-loving generations that shall people the earth for time, and the mansions of Heaven for all eternity.

Such is the true meaning of the golden wedding ring. Such is the lofty purpose of that Christian marriage which Christ has made to be, not merely a Sacrament, but a great Sacrament, in the one and only Church that He has founded.